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TWENTY-THREE

BDSM

Shaun Miller

*In this essay, **Shaun Miller** explains some basic concepts of BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, and Sadomasochism), and responds to two important objections to it—that its practitioners suffer from mental disorders (the medical objection) and that they have morally defective characters because they have morally compromised sexual desires (the ethical objection). Miller argues that BDSM participants suffer from no mental disorders, and, focusing more on the ethical objection, he argues that BDSM sexual desires for, say, domination or submission are conceptually, psychologically, and phenomenologically different from such desires in ordinary life (which are truly morally compromised). Finally, Miller argues that because BDSM desires and practices are looked down upon by society, BDSM participants have to constantly understand them, explore them, and justify them. These activities, he contends, might make for a richer and more interesting life.*

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Sadomasochism—shortened as BDSM or “kink”—has gained huge prominence in our cultural imagination. We can see it represented through the media, such as the popular book and movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*. As the stigma has fallen, the participation (or at least the admission of participation) has risen. Still, there is no full acceptance of BDSM for various reasons. Objections focus on whether BDSM is a psychological disorder, and on whether BDSM is ethical. This essay explains and addresses these major issues. I show that BDSM is not a psychological disorder, that having BDSM desires does not reflect badly on one’s character, and that BDSM can help one flourish if done in the right way.

WHAT IS BDSM?

BDSM describes multi-faceted sexual and erotic practices. Indeed, it is so multi-faceted that it is hard to give a definition of “BDSM,” though we can characterize it. The popular representation is that BDSM focuses on pain, but the major component is the consensual exchange of power. For a while, “S&M” was considered the go-to phrase, but now “BDSM” is the umbrella term for any power exchange in sexual relations. The acronym is made of three sets of terms. “BD” stands for “Bondage and Discipline.” Acts of bondage include restraining the partner(s) with ropes, handcuffs, or other grappings that restrict the hands or feet to certain positions. Acts of discipline include spankings or whippings through hands, paddles, or light leather whips. “D/s” stands for “Dominance and Submission.” Since the one who dominates has the power, the

submissive follows his or her “orders”—hence the “s” is lower case. Dominance is being in control and being the “top.” Submission is the one being controlled and being the “bottom.” Finally, “SM” stands for “somasochism.” Sadism is getting pleasure by inflicting pain on a partner. Masochism is getting pleasure by receiving pain from a partner.

BDSM practitioners use two phrases to differentiate BDSM from abuse: “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” (abbreviated as “SSC”) and “risk-aware consensual kink” (“RACK”). While both focus on the consent behind the activity, they also emphasize that the activities are essentially risky, but that the participants are of sound mind (“sane”) to understand and consent to the risk.

Finally, BDSM participants “play” various scenarios called “scenes” during which a power exchange occurs. Joanna Zaslow gives a good description:

In BDSM relationships, all activities and partnerships must be negotiated before they take place. This means that individuals must negotiate what their limitations are, what they are comfortable participating in and what signs or signals they will give when these limits have been crossed (these are known as “safe words”). Most importantly, the Master/slave relationship requires a contract between individual participants. This contract lays out the requirements and responsibilities for both parties, and also allows room for participants to negotiate how they will end the relationship, if need be.¹

Participants negotiate what the scene entails and its limits. The scene ends when the activity is over, or when the partner (typically the recipient) says the safeword—a specific word to let the partner know that the intensity must be toned down or the scene must end. Because sometimes

“stop” or “no” are part of the play, participants use words irrelevant to the role play to mean “stop” (e.g., “red”) and “slow down” or “check in” (e.g., “yellow”).

Suppose that a couple agrees that one of them be tied up in bed during sex. Once the scene is over, the power exchange is over. The restrained partner is untied. If, however, the person remains tied up when the scene is over, the power exchange is no longer consensual, so the act is closer to abuse or assault. The scene is set up such that all the participants negotiate it beforehand and consent to and desire it. Therefore, we can say that BDSM is neither assault nor abuse, and we can agree on the following basic claim that grounds the rest of this essay’s discussion: BDSM sexual scenes are ones to which the participants consent and desire, no matter whether the scene is taboo, involves pain, or involves the exchange of power.

There have been various objections to BDSM. I will discuss two main ones, the medical objection and the moral objection. I will argue that they are not convincing.

THE MEDICAL OBJECTION

BDSM has historically been seen as a neurosis or a mental illness. Consider *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a best-selling book that has helped popularize BDSM and “kink” behavior. The narrator is Anastasia Steele, who asks the title character, Christian Grey, why he does not want to be intimate:

“Why don’t you like to be touched?” I whisper, staring up into soft gray eyes.

“Because I’m fifty shades of fucked up, Anastasia.”²

Christian Grey is depicted as carrying a lot of emotional baggage. His mother was a prostitute, and both she and young Christian were abused. After she committed suicide, Christian had to live with a foster family for several months, and was later introduced to sex by his mother’s

female friends. Not only did he lose his virginity, but he was also part of a BDSM relationship where he played the submissive (“sub”). This background is meant to suggest that these experiences shaped Grey’s attitude about relationships, sexuality, and especially his interest in BDSM. The overall message is that BDSM practitioners have psychological and emotional issues.

Is this true? J. Roger Lee gives two reasons in support of this belief, which I will call the “natural function reason” and the “medical reason.” Let’s start with the natural function reason.

According to Lee, “The administration of pain, its infliction and its enjoyment, have little to no function in” the “natural set of drives called ‘human sexuality,’” which, on his view, promotes important goods, such as bonding with one’s partner, emotional support, pleasure, and possibly reproduction.³ Because BDSM often involves the enjoyment of the administration and reception of pain, BDSM does not promote such goods. This is because pain distracts one “from access to desires and tendencies the working through of which is sexuality.”⁴ To Lee, pain and sexuality are incompatible. This makes superficial sense: if sex is essentially about pleasure, then pain should not be part of it.

However, BDSM, including sadomasochism, can achieve the goods that Lee lists: BDSM can help the participants bond with each other, and it can provide them with emotional support and pleasure.⁵ For example, suppose that A and B engage in a flogging scene. Both of them receive pleasure from the activity and feel a strong connection toward each other. Both of them can bond during the experience, especially since the giving and receiving of pleasure (albeit in this case through pain) can bond two people to each other, and especially since sadomasochistic encounters require a lot of trust between the participants, and trust is an agent of human bonding.

If sadomasochism can do this, then it and other BDSM activities fulfill the goods that Lee enumerates.

Let us now attend to the medical reason. Lee believes that sadomasochistic people have developed Narcissistic Personality Disorder. But this is a problem, according to him, because “[i]f one has developed a personality structure in which the narcissistic, sadomasochistic awareness of pain is central to the sense one has of one’s self at its full, intense, most excellent functioning, then the all-consuming intensity of feeling and drive that come with sexuality and sexual activity will feel off, not right, unacceptably disconcerting without a phenomenology of pain as a component part.”⁶ And if the sex feels off if one does not feel pain, then the “narcissist...is made *unable* to make an objective good—knowledge of herself and of her place in the world—be good-for-her.”⁷ Lee concludes that narcissistic actions, which to him, as we have seen, include some BDSM activities, do not constitute aspects of leading a good and happy life.⁸ BDSM practitioners then, or at least those who practice sadomasochism, are not leading as well and as happy lives as they could.

Why believe that sadists and masochists are narcissists? A child may develop Narcissistic Personality Disorder when the child fails to develop its own sense of self from other objects, which can be caused by child abuse or neglect. Thus, the narcissist remains in a state of undeveloped ego and remains in a state of self-centeredness. Masochists believe that the pain they receive is what they deserve, and sadists believe that they teach others the “true” nature of existence, which is painful. The top demands attention to be in charge of the scene to make sure the bottom feels the pain; the bottom is at the center of attention because the scene is based on what the bottom feels. Both the sadist and the masochist thus replay their themes in a sexual and narcissistic encounter where they both give and receive pain, respectively. Lee argues that this is

based on a misperception of reality as painful, hence his claim that any of the goods that lead to the “natural set of drives of ‘human sexuality’” will “feel off, not right, unacceptably disconcerting” because all forms of sexuality will be distorted through the personality disorder.⁹

Lee’s reasoning, however, is mistaken. Laurie Shrage and Robert Scott Stewart argue that “the current definition and description of ‘Narcissistic Personality Disorder’ (extraordinary sense of self-importance and entitlement, lacking empathy, and so on) does not suggest that people with this disorder would likely be interested in kinky sex, and health professionals claim that they do not fully understand its causes.”¹⁰ Moreover, the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) distinguishes between paraphilias and paraphilic disorders, meaning that having atypical sexual interests or desires is not a problem unless it causes the person distress or interferes with their ability to function. Alice Dreger makes a nice illustration: “the foot fetishist who keeps getting arrested because he steals shoes, who fondles the feet of unconsenting women strangers, and who can’t hold a job because he’s too busy obsessing about his next sexual opportunity—he’s got a paraphilic disorder. The foot fetishist who is happy, comfortable, and functions fine—he just has a paraphilia.”¹¹

The DSM-5 also notes that “[m]ost people with atypical sexual interests do *not* have a mental disorder.” To have a paraphilic disorder, the DSM-5 requires that people feel distress about their interest not resulting solely from society’s disapproval, or “have a sexual desire or behavior that involves another person’s psychological distress, injury, or death, or a desire for sexual behaviors involving unwilling persons or persons unable to give legal consent.”¹² Indeed, there is evidence that BDSM participants have comparable or better mental health than non-participants, most likely because the former have a better understanding of consent and communication.¹³ So Lee is mistaken to claim that sadomasochists, let alone other BDSM

practitioners, have narcissistic disorders, and that the enjoyment of the affliction and reception of pain leads to a life that is not fully happy or well.

THE ETHICS OF BDSM DESIRES

One way to criticize BDSM is to claim that it is a form of assault, battery, or abuse. After all, some of the scenes look violent and psychologically devastating. However, we can easily assuage this worry by noting that the participants desire and consent to the scene, even if the scene looks violent or involves assault. Consider a boxing match, where the fight can be violent and assaultive, but the fighters desire and consent to the match. Consent converts the boxing match from assault to, well, a boxing match. It seems then that consent is sufficient for the permissibility of the activity.

However, BDSM might be problematic *despite* the consent. The criticism goes as follows. It seems that the desires involved in BDSM are problematic because of the kinds of desires they are. Desiring to inflict pain on someone else, or, worse, desiring to participate in a scene in which one is the master of another or one is the slave of another is surely troubling. This is especially so when those desires take on gender (e.g., a man whipping a woman), racial (e.g., a white person playing the role of a master of a black person who plays the role of the slave), and other roles.¹⁴ This objection has a feminist version. Claudia Card writes,

My own approach to sadomasochism initially...was the liberal, “sexual preference” approach... My present approach perceives sexual sadomasochism as enacting...roles of dominance and subordination that characterize... the norms of a patriarchal, misogynist society that is also riddled with homophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of

oppression. On this understanding, sadomasochistic desires have roots not simply in individual psychologies but in society at large; they are not mysterious givens but social constructions. The direction of my ethical concern has shifted, accordingly, more to the process of their construction than to that of enactment.¹⁵

And Sandra Bartky claims: “[S]adomasochism is one inevitable expression of women-hating culture. It powerfully reinforces male dominance and female subordination because, by linking these phenomena to our deepest sexual desires—desires defined by an ideologically tainted psychology as instinctual—it makes them appear natural. To participate willingly in this mode of sexuality is to collude in women’s subordination.”¹⁶ Bartky’s objection seems to require that BDSM participants, or even participants in any sexual encounter, have ethically untainted desires.

In a liberal society, each individual chooses how to live their life, based on their view of what the good life is, as long as basic rights are respected. However, the feminist concern is that society is structured such that we *think* that we are living our life based on what we deem good, but the goods are actually not so. Our desires are thus problematic because they contain and reflect unethical values, such as misogyny, homophobia, and racism. BDSM activities are especially worrisome, since the scenes seem to endorse and reinforce patriarchal values. After all, BDSM simulates sexual dominance, which is reflective of patriarchy.

As noted, however, the objection need not be couched in feminist terms or be only about misogyny. Generally speaking, because sexual desires have content (they are object-oriented or intentional), they tend to reflect social and cultural values, which are not always good. BDSM participants seem to represent or duplicate historically oppressive and oppressed positions, such

that one person has power over the other in the scene. Thus, according to this objection, in wanting to play such roles, BDSM participants have unethical desires—to want to play the role of a white master, for example, is to have the desires of white masters, and this is morally unhealthy to say the least. In short, the worry is that BDSM desires reflect patriarchal and other unwholesome values, so they are unethical; they indicate that the person who has them is not as good a person as they could be.

To assess this argument, let's use BDSM taboo role play as a case study, as it tends to be the type of BDSM activity of which many are suspicious. In taboo role play the participants play roles such as male dom/female sub (which is problematic because women submitting to men is paradigmatic of patriarchy); master/slave role play (especially problematic when the “slave” is of African descent and the “master” is white); Nazi/Jew role play (especially problematic when the sub is of Jewish descent); and rape fantasies, to give a few examples. The defender of BDSM must show that having and enjoying such desires is not necessarily unethical.

Consider male dom/female sub and white master/black slave role play. If the dom is a closeted racist or secretly wants to rape women and uses BDSM scenes as an outlet for his desires, then his character is vicious. This would make him morally unsound.¹⁷ As for the sub, if she internalizes the racism or misogyny—if she accepts racist or sexist attitudes against her own race or sex—then there is also a problem.

However, BDSM participants are not usually racists or people with internalized misogyny. Typical participants' desires are not “real” in the sense of genuine racist desires, and the participants usually understand that even if they are using an injustice as the background to or as part of their play, they do not endorse the actual injustice. The context of BDSM is different than that of an actual injustice, such that consent and communication set the context for the

BDSM scene to be ethical. Minimally, consent means that everyone involved agrees to the activity. When it comes to taboo domination such as race play, communication is important in that it allows the participants to develop trust and respect for each other. Without communication, there is no setup for when a BDSM context begins, and it would be difficult to tell whether those desires are for a BDSM experience and its pleasures or for a racist outlet. As BDSM performer Mollena Williams-Hass puts it:

When partners consensually, mutually agree to wade into these deep waters, they are trusting that the other does truly desire this activity, and that they will be respected on the other side of that intense journey. The person taking on the “oppressor” role is not exempt of risk. A white person coming at their Black partner with racial slurs without mutual negotiation, consent, and ongoing assent risks, at the very least, alienating their partner in a way that is potentially irreversible.¹⁸

According to Williams-Haas, then, there needs to be communication to garner trust that the participants really have specific BDSM desires for race play, and not racist desires. Of course, there will always be some risk, and Williams-Haas acknowledges that, but the communication to garner trust mitigates the risk. To see how, imagine a white man and a black woman who have known each other for a long time. They negotiate and discuss a BDSM scene, which she says she has been narrating in her mind for a while. During the scene, the man addresses the black woman using racial and sexual epithets and humiliates and threatens her, even saying that he owns her. The man uses a flogger to beat her. She briefly breaks character a couple of times and tells her partner that he could go a little harder on the flogging, up to the point where she says “yellow” to

signal that he should not go any further. The scene, say, lasts for one hour, after which they engage in aftercare—attention and concern for each other (usually for the sub) needed after an intense sexual experience. It can include cuddling, meeting the physical and emotional needs for the other’s well-being, and discussing the intensity and richness of the scene. After the aftercare, the woman takes a shower while the man prepares a brief meal so that she can run her errands. When she gets back from her errands, the man checks in on her to make sure that she is okay because they had engaged in a physically and psychologically taxing activity.

Note how the racialized sexual actions do not carry over into the lives of the partners once the scene is over. This is crucial because it shows that what the participants experience remains confined to the scene itself, indicating that the participants’ desires do not infect the rest of their psyches. The scene is just that, a scene; its context is such that the participants trust each other and have on-going communication before, throughout, and after.

In addition to consent and communication, there must be what we might call “good intentions” between the participants. Williams-Haas writes that when it comes to these “dark” fantasies, intention is all important: “The *intent* of those participating in taboo role play is not to harm others. Their intent may vary. It can be a reclamation, a re-creation, an exploration—but it is *never* a decimation, an obliteration of the humanity of the people involved. Intent is all-important when diving into these dark waters.”¹⁹ If the intention is to leave someone broken without any care afterwards or to simply be cruel, there is a problem. The dom ought to respect the limits of the scene.²⁰ We can say that to ensure that the other person’s desires are genuinely based on BDSM pleasures and are not racist, there must be consent and communication to ensure trust from the other person, and one must have “good intentions” to acknowledge that those

desires are based on enhancing the pleasure for everyone involved and not from the pleasure to act out on racist tendencies.

Although communication, consent, and good intentions help set up the context, there is a risk: if race play desires are similar to racist desires, and since racist desires are vicious desires, aren't race play desires also vicious? Granted that they do not carry over outside the BDSM scene, and granted that no participant has malicious intentions, when the participants are engaged in the activity, are their desires and the sexual or erotic pleasures that they experience not problematic because they are, say, racist? How else can they experience pleasure if these desires are not real in this sense?²¹

However, as I will argue, the differences between race play desires and racist desires are more crucial than whatever superficial similarities they might have. The desires are not the same—not conceptually, psychologically, phenomenologically, or ethically. Conceptually, it is possible for a white racist to desire to whip a black woman, but not to desire to whip her in a BDSM context; indeed, such a context might be weird to the genuine racist. It is also possible for a misogynist to want to rape women, but not want to “engage in ravishment fantasies” (as many in the BDSM community prefer to call them) with women in a BDSM scene; the BDSM scene might be a turn-off for him. Moreover, the converse is true: someone who desires to whip a black woman in a BDSM context might not desire to whip a black woman in general, and someone who desires to “ravish” women in a BDSM context might not desire to rape women in general. They are thus conceptually different.

What about psychologically? If Williams-Haas's white partner desires to whip Williams-Haas and he gets sexual satisfaction from it, he may not be satisfied by whipping another black woman. He might even be repulsed by it. The same could be said about rape fantasies in and

outside a BDSM context. Consider also desires that people find pleasurable and want fulfilled in a sexual context but find unpleasant outside a sexual context. For example, some people enjoy spanking during sex. However, it would be embarrassing, unpleasant, or improper outside a sexual context. Others enjoy choking or being choked during sex, but it would be highly unpleasant and threatening to receive choking outside a sexual context. Similarly, a good dom would not find pleasure in being dominant outside a BDSM scene and would not desire it; and a sub would likely not enjoy being humiliated by a boss at work. Thus, the desires are not the same, neither conceptually nor psychologically.

Phenomenologically, racist desires do not have the same “feel” as BDSM desires. Many in the BDSM community attest that the desire to be dominant in a BDSM context feels different from domineering in daily life, which is best described as abuse. BDSM participants in race play do not “feel” racist desires, and their goal is to perform a role as dominant, which is part of the fantasy. They do not feel, for example, genuine anger, hate, or contempt as racists do. For comparison, consider a U.S. Civil War battle reenactment, in which the “play” is set up where the North defeats the South. Imagine a participant who is on the side of the South, but who is not a racist and who is against any form of racism. He might still participate and enjoy playing the role for a variety of reasons: he can reenact history, he can play a part of an ancestor and tell the ancestor’s story, or he can educate people on exactly how this specific battle went. He does not feel hatred towards fellow players from the “North.” If, however, he is racist and plays on the side of the South as a martyr for the Southern cause, or to express unfair treatment from the North, what he feels during the re-enactment might be genuine hatred or anger. Thus, the desires in and out of a BDSM scene are phenomenologically different.

Ethically, what race play participants desire differs from what racists desire in three ways. First, race play participants want to satisfy the other's desires: they aim to achieve fun and pleasure with the other. They use their power and control to bring about happiness and pleasure for everyone involved. They want to build a connection because that feeds on each other's desires. And so vicariously, they desire to have a mutual connection. Kink and sex educator Anton Fulmen considers BDSM similar to dancing.²² The dom leads, the sub follows. While leaders guide the dance, followers are not simply following orders but have their own energy by engaging with their leader and following their steps. Those who love dancing talk about the chemistry between the partners and how the flow and energy make the dance great. BDSM is similar in creating a feedback loop of this dynamic to make the scene more erotically energized. Both the dom and the sub desire a BDSM "dance" where there is a mutual connection, chemistry, and a back-and-forth collaboration for erotic pleasure. For the "dance" to be successful, both have to enjoy themselves and want the other to enjoy themselves. Thus, race play participants desire to control based upon mutual agreement and to pleasure their partner.

Racists, on the other hand, and insofar as they use BDSM scenes as an outlet for their racism, do not desire a "dance." Instead, they build up their own pleasures and do not seek mutual enjoyment.²³ They desire an imitation of mutual participation; a narcissistic manipulation where the relationship is only one-sided. They desire to use the power for their gain, which is not intended to enhance the other people involved. Racists thus do not care about enhancing the erotic experience of their partner.

The racist who fantasizes about whipping black women will have "the-desire-to-whip-black-women" and the aim behind that desire is perhaps power, dominance, or racial superiority. The race play participant who fantasizes about whipping black women in a BDSM context has

“the-desire-to-whip-black-women-in-BDSM-scenes” and the aim is to increase both his *and* the black women’s pleasure. A real racist believes that people of color are inferior, but a good BDSM practitioner does not, and only acts during a scene *as if* he does. When the scene is over, he retains the belief that people of all races are equal.²⁴

Second, the race player desires the sub’s freedom to submit. This phrase sounds paradoxical, but, again, think of dancing. The leader takes charge of the dance, and the follower goes along. However, the leader does not just grab anyone’s hand and force them to dance; the leader invites someone to dance, and the follower has the freedom to follow. In other words, followers follow leaders because they want to and are not forced to. During a BDSM scene, it may look as if subs are not free, but they still can employ the safe word, and if everything is going smoothly, subs *want* to continue the scene: part of the role is that they *appear* not to be free, but that is part of the performance.

Racists, on the other hand, prefer to take away the other’s freedom such that they force the follower to dance—at the very least, they do not care about their “partner’s” freedom. This is a significant difference: the dom prefers the sub to be free, and the sub’s willingness to participate is vital to a successful BDSM scene, whereas the racist is indifferent to the other’s freedom or even desires to take it away. They see the sub with disdain. They may give orders or attempt to touch without agreed-upon rules. Such participants are often despised in the BDSM community and usually do not last long. What they desire is control but not for mutual pleasure.

Finally, race play participants care about each other’s well-being even outside the context of a BDSM scene. This can be either in general or specifically during the aftercare. For example, while they were planning to be in a scene, Lila-the-sub tells Omar-the-dom that her friend got into a car accident and she must quickly go. Omar adjusts so that she can take care of her friend,

and the scene stops. A racist either does not stop or wishes that the scene would continue so that he could obtain his pleasure.²⁵ Moreover, good doms and subs engage in aftercare or provide some space so that participants can emerge out of the BDSM roles and context and get back into the everyday context, whereas racists who abuse race play typically do not care about aftercare.

If the ethical objection is correct, a BDSM scene would not be a fantasy or a simulation of domination—it would *be* domination because the participants' desires make the interaction between them so. The black woman would therefore be complicit in her own oppression because she permitted and relished being dominated by a white man, and the white man is also complicit in the domination. As we have seen, however, BDSM desires are not really racist or sexist. What we have is a superficial structure of domination, which is part of the performance. We can then see that changing the context could spell the difference between replicating or endorsing an injustice and merely enjoying its simulation. The context is playful— it is a simulation²⁶ or make-believe.²⁷

BDSM desires are morally permissible as long as they are had in the right way: among other things (e.g., not consuming one's life), the desires must be for “play” rather than real domination, submission. Is it then possible that BDSM practitioners lead a well-lived, flourishing life? I turn to that in the next section.

BDSM AND FLOURISHING

In the previous section, I have considered the moral objection to BDSM that BDSM desires are unethical. However, there is a way to not only defend BDSM from objections, but to also show that it can be enriching, even helping one lead a flourishing life.

Having kink desires does not automatically make BDSM practitioners vicious people. If the reply to the objection in the previous section is correct, then having BDSM desires is compatible with having a good character. Moreover, acting on BDSM desires is normally confined to specific scenes, which means that BDSM is not a life-consuming activity.²⁸ Thus, BDSM practitioners are no different in this respect from other people. The BDSM “lifestyle” is no obstacle to having a good character or to other necessary goods in a human life, two things that are necessary, at least on an Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian view, for a good life.

We must also keep in mind that, normally, the inability to satisfy sexual desires, at least on occasion, can render a life frustrating. Satisfying sexual desires is a necessary component for leading a good life. Furthermore, BDSM desires are not mere sexual tastes that can be left unfulfilled without leaving the person frustrated (as long as this is compensated for by the fulfillment of some other sexual desires). Having BDSM desires is akin to having a basic sexual orientation, like being gay or straight, at least in the respect that not being able to act on one’s desires leaves one frustrated and unhappy. BDSM desires are experienced as essential to one’s identity.²⁹ Imagine having sexual attractions and desires but not being able to fulfill them. You could survive, but you would live a frustrated and difficult life.

I would, therefore, suggest that there are two different kinds of needs whose fulfillment is crucial for a flourishing life. The first is survival needs. These are the needs that one has to have in order to survive, such as food, water, and shelter. Without these needs, we would die, or be perpetually in pain and deprivation (if they are fulfilled infrequently). The second type of need goes above the minimal standards of survival. These would be “flourishing needs.” These include love, having friends, a sense of belonging, being part of a community, and sexual fulfillment. Notice that we can survive without these needs, but we would not live good lives.

While not satisfying BDSM desires would not render a life impossible to live, it would render it difficult. I now want to further suggest that satisfying BDSM desires may also lead to a feeling of empowerment. In other words, BDSM can *enhance* well-being. The main reason is that because BDSM desires are desires for some sort of power exchange, their possessors will always have to explore and think about them and about what it means to have and act on them. This aspect of BDSM desires allows their possessors to lead non-conventional, richer lives.

Consider friendship as a way to enrich one's life. Friends often make activities more enjoyable than normal. I might enjoy swimming at the beach or watching movies, but doing them with a friend can make them more enjoyable. This is not only because watching the movie with someone else is more enjoyable, but also because I enjoy my friend's reactions to the movie, and I enjoy his or her reactions to my own reactions to the movie. Watching a movie with a friend becomes a much more complex and, because of that, much more enjoyable, activity.³⁰

Sexual activities are similar. Suppose that Evan and Molly are acquaintances who enjoy having sex with each other. They have sex because it is sex, but also because it is *with each other*. Molly enjoys sex with Evan because it is *Evan's* body, and not just any other person's body. The same is true of how Evan regards Molly. Furthermore, Evan and Molly are comfortable with each other and encourage each other to be open about their sexuality and to pinpoint exactly what they want. Thus, their sex life is enhanced and improved, which in turn rebounds positively to their lives in general.

The above is especially true with respect to BDSM sexual activities. Having BDSM sex with untrustworthy people or, for some reason, unsympathetic ones, leaves the participant's desires unfulfilled. But having BDSM sex with a trusted partner allows the participants to explore their desires, not to mention enjoy acting on them. If Evan and Molly know each other

well, they begin to trust and get to know what the other's intentions are. Suppose Molly presents Evan with an opportunity to do a BDSM scene for the first time. She has a fantasy of being tied up and being choked while Evan is penetrating her. She has never done this with anyone, but she feels comfortable with Evan to explore this with him. Evan, because he knows Molly well, wants to help her fulfill this desire. They talk through the scene and plan out the details carefully.

Although Evan and Molly found the scene fulfilling, Molly thought it was too much, yet she enjoyed it enough to want to do it again and explore her desires more. Sometime later, they do the scene again. This time, however, Molly asks Evan to ease up on the choking. Evan complies and Molly enjoys the scene even more. After discussing it, it turns out that Molly did not want choking *per se*, but simply some pressure around her neck to simulate choking. They may engage in the scene multiple times with a better understanding of their desires and can fulfill them at a heightened level.

The above example suggests that individuals with taboo desires often have to understand them, think about them, and figure out whether they are justified to act on, and whether the mere having of them reflects badly on their character, including, of course, the importance of consent to what they do. Going back to race play or rape fantasies, the people involved may actually be more self-aware of their desires because they not only know that they are fringe desires, but they also know that the political backdrop possibly makes those desires troublesome. Thus, they are more in tune with their desires and may have a richer understanding of how problematic they could potentially be. By justifying the permissibility of their desires, and by acting on them in the face of social taboos, BDSM practitioners lead complex lives—intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and sexually.

Another way to enhance well-being is to be authentic. Much has been written on authenticity, but, roughly, being authentic means that one's actions and thoughts express who one is (in general, not necessarily on every occasion); they flow from and reflect one's character and personality.

Suppose Samantha is gay and desires to be with a woman but decides to be with a man because of social taboos against lesbianism. Although she might feel good because she adheres to social norms, she might feel alienation because of not acting on her genuine desires. Samantha later dates a woman and slowly begins to enjoy it despite the social taboos. She would feel empowered because of acting on her genuine desires. By understanding the truth about herself along with support from others, she develops confidence in her sexual and relationship needs. And by doing what she genuinely wants to do, Samantha feels more in control of her life, more self-directed, and can develop and hone exactly what she desires in relationships, intimacy, and sex. By being sexually and emotionally authentic, her well-being is enhanced.³¹

The same is true were Samantha to have BDSM desires. Fulfilling these desires enhances her well-being because she is being authentic in doing so. This is especially true in societies that consider BDSM activities taboo or perverted. Engaging in BDSM in the face of social disapproval helps one have self-direction, control, power, and confidence in one's self. Thus, engaging in BDSM is empowering and therefore enriching. It helps one live better.

Of course, a time might come when the social disapproval goes away, in which case the taboo aspects of BDSM would cease to be as challenging. But the prospect of social taboos fully going away seems low, because as long as desires are sexual and involve power exchanges, pain, or what is considered bizarre, society will likely always, to some extent at least, frown upon such

desires. Thus, practitioners of BDSM are likely to always find themselves in the interesting position of having to struggle with their desires but with the effect of leading richer lives.

To sum up, because BDSM practitioners do not follow the norm, they need to reflect more than usual on their desires, their justification, and the permissibility of acting on them, thereby leading richer and interesting lives, at least in this respect. Moreover, acting on their BDSM desires allows them to be in harmony with themselves, to lead an authentic life in the face of social taboos. Leading an authentic life is certainly one way to enhance one's well-being.³²

CONCLUSION

I aimed to show that BDSM desires need not be ethically or psychologically defective, and that satisfying and acting on them can actually enhance the practitioners' well-being. I argued that when BDSM desires are ethically permissible, when BDSM practitioners feel sexually empowered, when there is consent, and when the overall lifestyle does not consume their lives, they are doing BDSM "in the right way."

However, although the reader may find nothing philosophically troubling about BDSM, they might still find it unattractive or unappealing. I want to suggest a notion that has helped me when it comes to others' otherwise ethically unobjectionable sexual needs, desires, preferences, and tastes: Don't yuck someone's yum. What you may find sexually desirable, someone else may find abhorrent. Imagine if you wanted to fulfill an ethically permissible sexual desire, but someone else found it unappealing, even disgusting. The response may be judgmental, but the discouragement can cause stress and could stifle someone's sexual curiosity, perhaps even their well-being. Nowadays, we do not yuck someone's gay orientation, desire to have sex before

marriage, or desire to have sexual pleasure for the sake of having pleasure. In the same way, we should not yuck someone's BDSM desires, because shaming someone's sexual desires not only could stifle sexual curiosity, but could also affect one's well-being.³³

NOTES

1. Joanna Zaslow, "Control, Power and Pleasure: Relational Autonomy and Female Submission in BDSM," in *Talk About Sex: A Multidisciplinary Discussion*, edited by Robert Scott Stewart (Sydney, Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Press, 2013), 233-248, at 242.

2. E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 269.

3. J. Roger Lee. "Sadomasochism: An Ethical Analysis," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Sex and Love*, edited by Robert M. Stewart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 125-137, at 131.

4. Lee, "Sadomasochism," 131.

5. Sadomasochism does not lead to reproduction, but as Lee admits, "[p]rogenerative goods will flow from only a small percentage of sexual activities...while the other goods that flow from good sexual activity do so at a high level of frequency" (Lee, "Sadomasochism," 131).

6. Lee, "Sadomasochism," 128.

7. Lee, "Sadomasochism," 131.

8. Lee, "Sadomasochism," 131.

9. Lee, "Sadomasochism," 131.

10. Laurie J. Shrage and Robert Scott Stewart, *Philosophizing About Sex* (Broadview Press, 2015), 259. It does seem odd that Lee equates sadomasochism with narcissism; this might

be due to the time Lee's essay was written (1994), when sadomasochism was believed to be a mental disorder.

11. Alice Dreger, "Of Kinks, Crimes, and Kinds: The Paraphilias Proposal for the DSM"; <http://www.thehastingscenter.org/Bioethicsforum/Post.aspx?id=4494#ixzz47cVXN0q2> (accessed September 18, 2016).

12. American Psychological Association, <http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/Paraphilic%20Disorders%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>, my emphasis (accessed May 5, 2016).

13. To cite three studies, Pamela H. Connolly noted that BDSM practitioners had lower levels of depression, anxiety, psychological sadism, psychological masochism, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than non-BDSM people. They did, however, show higher levels of narcissism ("Psychological Functioning of Bondage/Domination/Sado-masochism (BDSM) Practitioners," *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality* 18:1 [2006], 79-120). Another study from Andreas A. J. Wismeijer and Marcel A. L. M. van Assen showed that BDSM practitioners were more extroverted, less neurotic, reported subjective well-being, but less agreeable than those who do not practice BDSM. Moreover, those who were "tops" reported lower levels of neuroticism and attachment anxiety compared to submissives, who reported higher levels of agreeableness. Also, both the dominant and submissive reported equivalent-to-slightly- better outcomes in most cases, which suggests that neither role is inherently pathological ("Psychological Characteristics of BDSM Practitioners." *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 10: 8 [2013], 1943-52).

These studies, however, may not be entirely representative. Connolly's tests were administered to 132 self-identified BDSM practitioners, and Wismeijer and van Assen's study

had 902 people, but were based on one website based in the Netherlands. The control group, however, were about six years younger, less educated, and more likely to be female than the BDSM group.

A more representative study concluded that for most BDSM practitioners, “BDSM activities are not a pathological symptom of past abuse or of difficulty with ‘normal’ sex” (Juliet Richters, Richard O. De Visser, Chris E. Rissel, Andrew E. Grulich, and Anthony Smith, “Demographic and Psychosocial Features of Participants in Bondage and Discipline, ‘Sadomasochism’ or Dominance and Submission (BDSM): Data from a National Survey,” *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 5:7 [2008], 1660-68, at 1667). See also Ummni Khan for in-depth empirical studies that BDSM is not necessarily psychologically damaging to the practitioner: “Sadomasochism in sickness and in health: Competing claims from science, social science, and culture.” *Current Sexual Health Reports* 7: 1 (2015), 49–58.

14. On how sexual desires can be problematic, see Seiriol Morgan, “Dark Desires,” in this volume.

15. Claudia Card, *Lesbian Choices*, <http://www.feminist-reprise.org/docs/card.htm> (accessed May 7, 2016).

16. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 48, 50.

17. On the other hand, Patrick Hopkins points out that a dom having a cruel character but only engages in these scenes in a BDSM context may deserve some praise because they are controlling their immoral impulses (“Simulation and the Reproduction of Injustice: A Reply,” *Hypatia* 10:2 [1995], 162-170), at 164). While this may be true, this person clearly does not have a fully good character because of his desires.

18. See <http://www.mollena.com/2013/04/12212/> Willaims-Haas (“Haas” because in 2015 she married the composer Georg Friedrich Haas) is a black woman who has participated in BDSM for 20 years, including being a sub to white male doms.

19. Mollena Williams, “Digging in the Dirt: The Lure of Taboo Role Play,” in *The Ultimate Guide to Kink: BDSM, Role Play, and the Erotic Edge*, edited by Tristan Taormino (Berkeley, Calif.: Cleis Press, 2012), 366-387, at 370-371 (her emphasis).

20. One must then trust one’s partner to know that they are not really a closeted racist. See Williams <http://www.mollena.com/2009/04/race-play-interview-part-iv/> (accessed 6 July, 2016).

21. On the ethical issues surrounding having problematic sexual desires, see Seiriol Morgan, “Dark Desires” (this volume, **XX-XX**).

22. Anton Fulmen, *The Heart of Dominance: A Guide to Practicing Consensual Dominance*. (City: Createspace Independent, 2016), 12–13.

23. See Shannon M. Martin, Felix Smith, and Stuart W. Quirk, “Discriminating Coercive from Sadomasochistic Sexuality.” *Archives of sexual behavior* 45: 5 (2016), 1173–1183.

24. Viola Johnson, a black Jewish female sub who enjoys master/slave and Nazi/Jew play, goes so far as to say that she can ignore the reality of the political backdrop altogether so as to enjoy the fantasy: “We have left reality on the other side of the leather door. In no way have we downplayed the historic bitterness of the past; we have just chosen to keep it in perspective, and outside of the scene. Those who, for personal reasons, can’t play slave scenes, just don’t play slave scenes.” See <http://www.leatherweb.com/raceplayh.htm> (accessed 30 October, 2016). Others such as Goddess Sonya, a black professional dominatrix, does not enjoy race play since she prefers to play the dom and there’s nothing racially charged by calling a white man “honky.”

See Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 68.

25. As Fulmen puts it: “There must be some way that the terrible things we do to them are ultimately built upon their desire—whether that’s their own desire for the fantasy we’re playing out, or just desire to please us by fulfilling our fantasy—and there must be some way for them to tap out of the dynamic if they ever really and truly stop wanting to be in it. If those two things aren’t true, then what we’re doing is abuse, and no two ways about it” (*The Heart of Dominance*, 41).

26. Hopkins also argues that BDSM is a simulation of injustice, which could make it ethical (“Simulation and the Reproduction of Injustice”).

27. Nils-Hennes Stear argues that BDSM is make-believe, which could make it ethical (“Sadomasochism as Make-Believe,” *Hypatia* 24:2 [2009], 21-38).

28. There are cases of BDSM engagements that can take over large parts of a life, such as erotic ownership (sometimes referred to as “24/7,” “lifestyle BDSM” or “total power exchange”). The dom “owns” the sub, and the sub willingly does what the dom asks, in an arrangement that can last weeks, months, even years. But these are a minority. See Robin Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), especially chapter 5.

29. On sexual orientation, see the essay by Dembroff in this volume. On comparing BDSM to gayness, see Tess M. Gemberling, Robert Cramer, and Rowland S. Miller, “BDSM as Sexual Orientation: A Comparison to Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Sexuality,” *Journal of Positive Sexuality* 1 (Nov. 2015), 56-62.

30. We can see these examples in Aristotle's view of friendship in Books VIII and IX of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. My view does not require that the friends be virtuous, but if they are, this ensures that everything they do is good or not bad.

31. On sexual empowerment, see Zoë D. Peterson, "What Is Sexual Empowerment? A Multidimensional and Process-Oriented Approach to Adolescent Girls' Sexual Empowerment," *Sex Roles* 62:5-6 (2010), 307-13.

32. To be clear, I am not claiming that BDSM practitioners are *necessarily* flourishing simply in virtue of being BDSM practitioners. Other conditions, such as being a good person in other aspects of one's life, must be satisfied for them to flourish.

33. Thanks to Alexander Neubauer and Damon Watson for reading sections of this essay and helping me clarify some of the arguments. Special thanks to Raja Halwani for reading drafts, clarifying some of the issues of this essay, and editing the paper to a manageable length.